



Gateway University Charter School Recommendation

Revocation, effective at the end of the 2018-19 academic year



TCA § 49-13-122(b)(1) allows a charter authorizer to revoke a charter agreement at any time if the chartering authority determines that the school **“committed a material violation of any conditions, standards, or procedures set forth in the charter agreement.”**

- Gateway University had a non-functioning governing board that did not hold legitimate meetings during the 2017-2018 school year
- Grades were awarded in two classes – Academic Seminar and Geometry – in which students did not receive instruction
- Gateway University relied on uncertified teachers, particularly in English and World History & Geography
- An employee did not clear a background check, but was nevertheless employed by Gateway University

Revocation



A non-exhaustive list of statute, contract, and charter application provisions that have been materially violated are listed below:

Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-13-111(i)

Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-13-111(o)

Gateway Contract Recital(b)

Gateway Contract § 5(c)(viii)

Gateway Contract § 7(c)

Gateway Contract § 7(h)(ii)(5)

Gateway Contract § 7(h)(iii)(b)(3)

Gateway Contract § 7(o)

Gateway Contract § 7(o)(3)

Gateway Contract § 7(o)(7)

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The Background

Timeline and Overview

Timeline



June 20, 2018 – Whistleblower reaches out to Office of Charter Schools and Board of Education; preliminary investigation begins

June 25, 2018 – Investigation into allegations begins in earnest, including a request for documents and a meeting with Gateway University

July 19, 2018 – Gateway University's attorney contacts OCS to schedule a meeting date

August 15, 2018 – OCS meets with Gateway University to further discuss allegations

September 2018 – Chief Leon shared the conclusions with Superintendent Hopson, who asked OCS to get guidance from TDOE. TDOE reiterated SCS's role as the authorizer and arbiter of potential revocation decisions.

October 2018 – Results are reviewed, compiled, and submitted from OCS to Chief Leon and Gateway University for comment. Gateway requests one language change, which was agreed to. Gateway disputes several of the conclusions.

December 2018 – Gateway University notified of recommendation

Allegations and Findings



1) There was a non-functioning, “fictitious” governing board that didn’t hold legitimate meetings during the 2017-2018 school year

Substantiated

2) Grades were awarded in two classes – Academic Seminar and Geometry – in which students did not receive instruction

Substantiated

3) Gateway University relied on uncertified teachers, particularly in English and World History & Geography

Substantiated

4) An employee did not clear a background check, but was employed by Gateway University

Substantiated

5) Grades were changed in English and Geometry

Neither substantiated nor unsubstantiated, but merits concern

6) Students were improperly used as custodial staff

Not substantiated

Investigatory Methodology



The Office of Charter Schools spoke with the following Gateway University employees and representatives, and other entities:

- Dr. Soso Dede, school leader
- A Gateway University custodial vendor
- Three (3) individuals who were employed at Gateway University during the 2017-2018 school year but who separated before the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year
- Four (4) individuals who were employed at Gateway University during the 2017-2018 school year and who remained at the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year
- Gateway University Governing Board members

The Office also requested and/or reviewed various item and documents, which included, but were not limited to, Gateway University's contract and charter school agreement, charter school board roster, meeting minutes and other documents, course syllabi, class rosters, staff lists, results of background checks, relevant education records, and information obtained through PowerSchool, grade books, and teacher rosters.

We partnered with Internal Audit and General Counsel on conducting the investigation.

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Findings

Findings 1: Governing Board



Gateway University's charter application and contract states the governing board will be no less than five (5) members and no more than fifteen (15). However, the governing board only had four (4) members, including the school leader.

The board minutes submitted by the school leader suggest that meetings occurred regularly but that Board Chair Anthony Brown only attended one meeting all year.

Current board chair Colby Mitchell confirmed the validity of the 2017-2018 minutes provided by the school leaders

Findings 2: Grades Earned Without Instruction



Academic Seminar

All current and former employees, with the exception of the school leader, referred to Academic Seminar as some variation of a glorified study hall.

Academic Seminar was intended to be a study skills and behavioral health course.

Gateway staff stated there was no weekly curriculum or grades assignments. Some teachers had students watch the news and write responses. One stated that Academic Seminar was a “pass/fail” class. One stated that they “never did anything during that period” and they were never given instruction on how to administer the class during the academic year.

The school leader stated that Academic Seminar was a hybrid class, which relied on Habitudes, Career 21, and Avid to supply curriculum and coursework. He stated that students received something similar to a completion grade.

Findings 2: Grades Earned Without Instruction



Geometry

Seven (7) students were enrolled in Geometry during the 2017-2018 across two cohorts, one group of three (3) and one group of four (4) meeting at separate times, according to PowerSchool records

The school leader stated that students were temporarily enrolled in Virtual School but withdrew. Records obtained by OCS from Virtual School showed only four students ever logged into Geometry using the program.

The founding math teacher at Gateway stated that there was never a geometry teacher; he stated that students were given a basic geometry overview, but were expected to work independently and without instruction.

Findings 2: Grades Earned Without Instruction



Geometry (continued)

Every former Gateway University staff member interviewed described the Geometry Course as occurring without instruction and in the hallway. Some stated the students took class in a “nook”, some said they went a common area. No staff member said they ever saw a Geometry teacher. Some staff reported that occasionally the school leader would teach Geometry.

“I couldn’t say I ever saw a geometry class being taught.”

The school leader stated that the students taught themselves using Glencoe and Kahn. He stated that the students would meet with him as a group for fifteen minutes in the morning but otherwise received no direct instruction.

The school leader stated that the students worked collaboratively during the year.

Findings 2: Grades Earned Without Instruction



Geometry (continued)

OCS received the gradebook from Student Information Management for Geometry. It matched the grade book provided to OCS from Gateway.

However, every student earned the exact same grade for every assignment in every quarter, and they each received the same final grade, a 92%.

The state End of Course assessments for Geometry show that all seven students who took the EOC scored in the “Below” level.

Findings 3: Unlicensed Teachers



The long-term substitute for English, who taught from the first week of March 2018 to the end of the school year, possessed an expired permit license for Sped Modified K-12.

The long-term substitute for World History & Geography, who taught from early September 2017 to the end of the school year, was unlicensed.

It appears Gateway University used licensed teachers as the Teachers of Record in PowerSchool. Although, if the Teachers of Record were actually teaching, they were doing so outside their license. There is no evidence that the Teachers of Record for English, World History & Geography, and Geometry ever taught those classes.

Findings 4: Background Check



A teacher employed by Gateway University from October 22, 2017 to February 2018 was not cleared by SCS Safety & Security for employment.

Both Gateway University and Safety & Security provided OCS with a copy of the same letter, dated October 19, 2017, from Safety & Security, noting that additional information was needed before clearance could be provided. No additional information was provided, but the employee began work on October 22, 2017 nonetheless.

Revocation



It is recommended that the Shelby County Schools Board of Education revoke the charter agreement for Gateway University, based on material violations of the conditions, standards, or procedures set forth in the charter agreement, **effective at the end of the 2018-2019 school year.**